

Title: Better Together  
Date: October 10, 2021  
Subject: We are to renew our commitment to and work toward better being the community of God.  
Scripture: 1 John 4:7 – 21; Ephesians 4:16

Amber was playing basketball with some friends when an idea popped into her brain -- her community could benefit from having an all-female basketball league. She recruited friends to help and started a group that became Ladies Who Hoop. They wanted to have fun and impact the next generation. They used basketball to foster teamwork, build confidence and character as well as to encourage women and girls to become meaningful contributors to their community. One of the original players who became a mentor said, "There is so much camaraderie among us. This is something I've been missing. We support each other in so many different ways. I love seeing the girls succeed and grow." (Our Daily Bread. October 6, 2021)

Sounds a lot like the church Christ started - a place to support one another, to have camaraderie, to encourage one another to be meaningful contributors. It's a sense of community.

Howard Macy ([bible.org/article/community-god%E2%80%99s-design-growth](https://bible.org/article/community-god%E2%80%99s-design-growth)) speaks about misunderstandings people have of community and defines it, "At the mere mention of the word *community*, people often eye you as if you had dropped in from another world, smile tolerantly, and hope you change the subject. Good, sensible, Christian people. They fear that you're going to tell them they have to sell all they own, move to a farm, wear bib overalls, and raise peanuts. Or that they have to abandon their fertilized lawns and move to the inner city. Because they misunderstand the idea of community, many Christians don't want to think about it at all.

"To avoid thinking about community simply because we misunderstand it will deprive us of one of God's greatest gifts. The idea of community is, in a sense, from another world, a world very unlike our own. But it is neither from the world of communes in Vermont nor from the placid world of cookies and tea Christians share before they rush back to their isolated lives. Community is from the world as God wants it to be. It is the gift of a rich and challenging life together, one that we need and can receive with joy.

"Christian community is simply sharing a common life in Christ. It moves us beyond the self-interested isolation of private lives and beyond the superficial social contacts that pass for "Christian fellowship." The biblical ideal of community challenges us instead to commit ourselves to life together as the people of God."

A little RENEW review is in order. God seeks to renew us day by day from the moment we placed our trust in Jesus as our Savior and became new creations. (2 Corinthians 4:16). How are we doing in renewing our spirits by being regularly involved in God's word and when we sin by confessing the sin and repenting? Are we renewing in our purpose by submitting ourselves to Jesus to become more like him, serving Him and people, bringing people to him as Savior and engaging in what is good? How did we engage this past week in showing love to God and to other people because of renewing our remembrance of the love of God has shown to us?

To be renewed in spirit, purpose and love requires help. We receive that from God and his Word as the Holy Spirit inside us helps us understand what God is communicating. God also uses other instruments. He uses people, more specifically, those who also know Jesus Christ as their Savior, our brothers and sisters in Christ, to refine each other.

The fourth way to experience renewal is by being part of a community, a fellowship.

A. Community with others begins by having community with God.

Please turn back to 1 John 4 if you've turned away from the Scripture read earlier. There we find the bold assertion that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). It's one of his defining characteristics, maybe the defining characteristic. God is love. Everything flows from that.

Love is the dominant word in this passage. It's mentioned 12 times in the first six verses. Love isn't mentioned in the next three verses, but it's described through what God has given us - the Spirit, his Son to be the Savior of the world. A description of God's love was also intermingled in the initial verses. In the last six verses, love occurs 14 times. That's 26 times. Must be important. Kind of like it's trying to run a little competition with 1 Corinthians 13 for the title of "The Love Chapter."

All love finds its source in God (1 John 4:7, 9, 10, 11, 19). His love allows people to come into a relationship with him. When we place our trust in Christ, we have fellowship/communion/community with God the Father (1 John 1:3). Because of that relationship we also have community/communion/fellowship with those who've placed their trust in Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7).

Since God treasures relationships with people, we're to treasure them as well. We're called to a personal relationship with the Lord but it isn't private. It's an individual relationship with God but it's not lived out in isolation. We're called to believe and to belong. We don't have the option of being "all by myself" as followers of Jesus Christ. We're in it together.

B. Benefits of being in a community

1. The opportunity to show and receive love. We think of cute, cuddly little babies as being so lovable and loving. However, babies exhibit a selfish streak. They want what they want and don't want to do what they don't want. Often the first word a toddler can clearly say is "no." Adults have the same selfish streak.

Love is a skill to be learned. Children soak up our love, learn from what we do -- what it means to love. Children of God learn from the Father how to love. We love others because God has loved us. His method of teaching involves putting us in places where we can learn how to love. He provides opportunities to love meaning we need to be in close proximity with the people to be loved.

Mamie Adams always went to the same post office because the employees were friendly. When she went to buy Christmas stamps, the lines were particularly long. Someone pointed out she didn't need to wait in line because there was a stamp machine in the lobby. "I know," said Mamie, "but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis." Mamie wanted and craved human contact and interaction. She needed them. She's not the only one. We all do.

Another Scripture connects the love we have from God with the love we're to express to people. It's in the context of our brothers and sisters in the Lord: "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart since we as members of one body were called to peace" (Colossians 3:12- 15).

We're to be devoted in love to other believers (Romans 12:10). It isn't a part time gig but a full-time job. We're to have love, compassion, sympathy, harmony and humility as we interact with one another (1 Peter 3:8). Humility means we don't brag about what we've done, what I've done, in showing love.

2. The opportunity to build. For this we need to go back to the book of Ephesians. Chapter four uses the analogy of a body. It stresses the idea of unity even as a physical body is a unit. It provides some of the giftings and outworkings through positions. The purpose is for the body to be built up into maturity. Paul writes that we're no longer to be infants who'll be negatively impacted by waves of false teaching, but that we'll be able to maintain the truth and grow up into the head who is Christ. READ Ephesians 4:16.

I just had my annual physical. Measure height, weight, heart rate, and blood pressure. Check eyesight. Look in the ears, nose and mouth. Go over list of medications, supplements and vitamins. Test mental capacity by giving three words to remember at the end of the nurse's part of the exam.

The subject of exercise seems to routinely come up whenever a person goes to the doctor. I think it was the time before this where the advice was given about needing to sweat because that's when exercise really benefits.

Just as the physical body is designed to grow, so the spiritual body of Christ is to grow. Muscles need to be exercised to maintain their vitality, to increase in size and power, not so they can be flashy, but so they're able to perform their intended function.

The body of Christ exercises its muscles through the Bible's "one anothers." The primary one, love, was seen in 1 John 4. They're everywhere, spread throughout the rest of Scripture. They're our exercise regimen. Do a little encouraging one another and the body gets in better shape. Do a few reps of serving one another and the body grows. Carry burdens for one another and the body is infused with energy.

This brings us to the second part of Ephesians 4:16. "As each part does its work."

The physical body is a unified whole comprised of complex interconnected systems. Did any of you wake up this morning having to try to find your big toe? Where did that little piggy wander off? Did you get to church and realize you left your spleen at home? No. That doesn't happen.

God instructed human writers to use our bodies as visible illustrations of what it means to be in the body of Christ. We're interconnected. Each part has a purpose that contributes to the entire body, that aids in the functioning of the local body and the universal body.

Let's talk food for a moment - chili. We need hamburger, seasoning, chili or kidney beans. Some use macaroni or noodles. Now I started it – the great chili debate. Cheese to go on top. Sour cream. Some like to put their chili on top of Fritos or rice. We could decide to eat just one ingredient...hamburger...and nothing else. Or open the seasoning packet and just eat that. We could make a meal out of the beans or the macaroni. Might get filled up, but it's nothing like combining the individual items together and diving into a bowl of chili. We could do the same with brownies. A meal of just flour or sugar? Ick. It's better together. The body of Christ is better together.

### 3. Protection

The difficulty arises when some parts of the body think they have nothing to contribute or aren't connecting and interacting with the other parts. Some followers of Jesus Christ think they don't need anybody, any human being. They're just perfectly fine living all by their lonesome. "Me and Jesus, we got our own thing going." Hate to tell them...but they're wrong. Another song correctly states, "We all need somebody to lean on." A third song goes further, "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world." While it certainly doesn't have anything to do with being lucky, followers of Jesus Christ need other followers of Jesus Christ to have someone to lean on. We are people who need people. I need people. You need people. The Lord made us that way.

This can be tough for independent minded Americans to admit. However, striving for independence from other people can lead to isolation which can lead to loneliness and disfunction. None of those are good for the body of Christ, the family of God, the community of believers or an individual.

Please turn to Hebrews 10:25. READ.

It seems like some had already given up meeting together or were at least toying with the idea. The Greek word for giving up speaks of deserting and abandoning. It's a soldier going AWOL, being absent without leave. He's decided it's not worth being involved in the fight. I suppose we could change the scenario and try to give some credit to the soldier. Maybe he decided he was going to leave his encampment and fight the battle all by himself. It's not going to work out really well. He's going to be quickly attacked by the enemy and defeated, no matter what Rambo could do. He may have great intentions but it's not going to work out because he's away from the protection and assistance of other soldiers. Though the Army used it in their advertising campaign to feature how much an individual can accomplish, there really isn't anything such as an army of one.

There really isn't anything such as a follower of Christ of 1. Kind of an awkward way to say, but I think you catch the meaning. The person may not realize it, but they're missing incredible opportunities and obligations. We're told we're going to need each other more and more and more as we see the day of Christ's return and judgment approaching. Things won't get easier for followers of Jesus Christ. There'll be more attacks from the devil and those who are his servants whether willingly or unaware. We see it happening in our country as freedom of religion is under attack. Churches and those who speak out for Christ and against moral sins are being viewed as menaces and dangers to society. We need each other even more.

The previous verse in Hebrews 10 focuses on one aspect of using community to build up the body. READ Hebrews 10:24. Many translations speak of spurring or provoking fellow Christians to love and good works. The New Living Translation takes a less confrontational approach: “Let us think of ways to motivate.” I kind of like the spurring and provoking, except when it’s done to me. Yet that’s what we need to do – lovingly “motivate” one another to acts of love and good works.

The people of a small African village wonderfully converted to Christ. They weren’t able to build a church where everyone could meet but constructed a small prayer hut in the center grassy area. Over time paths were cut through the grass as people regularly made their way from their hut to the prayer hut. One man gradually gave up going. Others noticed because grass had begun to grow back on his path. Some of his brothers and sisters lovingly talked to him, “Brother, there’s grass on your path.” They nudged him.

The church in the immediate days after the death of Christ is an example of church priorities. The end of Acts chapter 2 (Acts 2:42, 47) describes the church devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread – both communion and having meals together – as well as to prayer. They shared these elements in community with others. Greg Laurie of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California developed an acronym of these core elements. It’s W E L L - A Worshipping church, an Evangelizing church, a Learning church and a Loving church.

One of the shows Jean and I went to in Branson this week while on vacation with my brother and his wife was The Dutton Family. They perform in a theater where they do everything. The people who sell tickets and concessions also appear on stage. The Duttons are an extremely talented musical family featuring violins (fiddles), banjos, mandolins, guitars. The play list ranged from pulse pounding songs that sounded like the Trans-Siberian Orchestra to “blue-grassified” (their word, not mine) versions of popular music.

The concluding number featured 7 violinists. I know there are 6 on the screen but the photo I took was blurry, so we had to get one from their website. Initially they played their own instrument but switched to playing the one next to them. The first would continue doing the fingering of the strings while the second reached under her violin to bow the strings of the first. Continued down the line till each used their fingers on their violin while the one to their right bowed them. What the picture doesn’t show is what happened next. The guy on the left end reached his violin behind the group so the first guy could bow the strings.

Community. Each playing a role. Helping the neighbor.

Anne Cetas has written, “God has put us into the family of his people for support in our lives. We need each other to keep walking the path of life in Christ. Sometimes that may mean listening to someone who's struggling, providing for a practical need, or speaking a few words of encouragement. We can celebrate successes, offer a prayer for strength in a difficulty, or challenge each other to grow in faith. And in everything, we can “always strive to do what is good for each other” quoting 1 Thessalonians 5:15. (Our Daily Bread. October 6, 2021)

We’re better together.